

## A TAMMUZ RITUAL IN KURDISTAN (?)

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WHILE excavating the Palace of Sargon at Khorsabad, for the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, we were called from our house one night (March 20th, 1930) by the sound of singing and the clapping of hands which accompanies the dances of that country-side. In front of our gate we found the villagers squatting and standing round an open space in which two figures performed. One was dressed as a woman, in a black gar-



FIG. 1. Rain-making dance in progress

ment, with anklets, bracelets, and veil. In her we recognized later one of our workmen. The other personage was wearing a high pointed basket as head-gear, a goatskin round his shoulders, and a bell tied to his girdle; he carried a heavy stick, and both had their faces blackened.

The stages of the dance, once or twice repeated, were as follows. After a little preliminary action, executed in the usual way by rhythmic movements of hips, feet, and hands while the two dancers, facing each other, slowly described a circle (Fig. 1), the man lay down on the ground, the 'woman' at once showing signs of distress, beating her breast, throwing earth over her hair, while she continued to dance round the prostrate body. She drew the spectators into the scene by pointing to the dead man, lifting his arms and legs in turn to show how limply they fell. The whole dance was mimetic, performed in silence while the onlookers continued to sing and clap, maintaining the rhythm throughout. The 'woman' finally knelt down beside the corpse with an increased display of sorrow. At this moment one of our men rushed from the house and threw a bucket of water over the prostrate figure. At once both performers sprang to their feet, the man demonstrating in the

most convincing manner how completely he had recovered his vitality. He not only repeated the earlier movements of the dance with renewed vigour, but the two actors approached each other at intervals and mimed sexual union. Sometimes an onlooker would pull the 'woman' by her clothes and cause wild sallies on the part of the other dancer into the crowd, where he



FIG. 2. Male dancer in costume, with felt hat, mirror, bell, and stick

laid about him with his stick. Then he whinnied like a horse and rode his stick, galloping round, soon with the 'woman' in front of him astride on the stick. In reply to our inquiries it was made clear that the ride had no particular destination, but that it was essential for the rain that all this should be performed, also that it would be very unlucky for us if we let the dancers depart unrewarded. This we therefore prevented, and settled down to investigate the significance of the scene just witnessed.

It was averred on all sides that the dance was made 'for rain'. The winter had been very dry till then (two days later our excavations were interrupted by a spell of wet weather lasting for twelve days!) and, since the hilly country at the foot of the Kurdish mountains cannot be irrigated, the crops are exclusively dependent on rainfall. If rain is scarce 'all become poor', because all prices rise. A general discussion in the

village decides whether the time has come for performing the ceremony. When unsuccessful it is repeated a little later. If even then rain does not follow one has to resign oneself to the drought that is the will of God.

It was said to be 'shame' to perform the dance in any village but one's own; but, since Khorsabad is from every point of view a poor and uncivilized place, the neighbouring people from Fadhdhiliya send Qasim Muhammad ul Baghl to dance it there with one of the men of Khorsabad to act the woman. In the village they go from house to house, and each householder must give them something. The presents are mostly food, and afterwards the whole village gathers and feasts together, praying Allah for rain. If a man were to refuse to give while the performance takes place at his door, the other villagers would enter the house and smash everything they found.

Regarding the equipment, we could at first get only hazy information; only the question whether the blackening of the faces was essential elicited an emphatic: 'God has ordained it; white won't work.' But later the 'male' dancer brought his traditional gear (Fig. 2) from Fadhdhiliya. Its main feature

is a large felt hood which is drawn over the face and is ornamented with a beard of black goat's hair and tassels of the same material which are stitched to its pointed upper part. The basket which we had seen in use at Khorsabad had been a makeshift, and the blackening of the face may similarly have been adopted only when the face of the man, the most essentially human part of him, which therefore had to be merged into that of the strange creature he impersonated, was not covered by the hood with its black hair. The illustration shows the small round mirror in front of the hood, as well as the bell



FIG. 3. Details of 'woman' dancer's finery

hanging from the girdle and the stick which we have already mentioned. The woman's dress shown in the pictures (Figs. 1 and 3) was the finest they could procure, but for this very reason it was not worn, of course, in the actual ceremony, which necessitated kneeling down on ground muddy from water-pourings.

Qasim told us that, before the regrettable slackness of the present time, a tail made of a rolled-up skin of a black goat, and horns of the same material, were worn by the male dancer; and that the Kurds in the mountains execute the dance in full daylight and wear not only the long false beard of goat's hair but also artificial tusks made of bone or wood; and that this was likewise done in *Fadhiliya* in former days.

With some diffidence I give below a translation of the songs which accompany the dance. They were taken down under considerable difficulties, but their publication will answer its purpose if it brings into the field an anthropologist, or simply a patient observer, who knows Kurdish; for the material is obviously too important to be treated by an archaeologist who cannot give time to such an investigation, and whose phonetic transcription could scarcely be printed.

The method of recording was as follows. During the ceremony I noted down certain catchwords and recurring refrains. Later on, in 1933 to be

exact, we summoned the dancer and musician from *Fadhdhiliya* and two intelligent workmen from that village for a quiet session on a day when rain had stopped our excavations. The people from *Fadhdhiliya*, as Mr. C. J. Edmonds tells me, belong to the Bajilan tribe of Kurds and are an off-shoot from the main body in the Khaniqin district; like them they speak the *Gurani* dialect. We used Arabic, however, now the official language of Iraq, of which they have some knowledge. None of the men knew what 'translating' meant, so that every attempt to get one or two words rendered into a medium which we understood led at once to a voluble outburst of comment. It would never do to suggest a translation oneself, as that would elicit a 'yes' prompted rather by politeness than by truth.

As the whole tradition is oral, there is no set version of the songs, which are merely composed of a series of motives presented as they occur in the singer's mind; the initial phrases which often recur as refrains are apt to be inserted at any moment and in any place, while the singer in the meantime meditates upon his next words. In these circumstances it is, of course, impossible to take down a standard transcription, for if the singer is too much disturbed he loses his thread completely. I therefore merely asked him to sing slowly, while I wrote down an improvised phonetic rendering. Next I asked him to repeat the whole song or parts of it, correcting what notes I had, and bringing him back by quotations to an approximately similar sequence of motives. Then, finally, we started on the translation of my notes.

The dancer himself, who performs this office every year at *Fadhdhiliya*, learned it from old people when he was a boy. He is rather a stupid man, as indicated by his name, Qasim Muhammad the Mule, and indeed his contemporaries are on the whole too sophisticated to execute such a dance. Qasim does not himself sing when dancing, but he and the village musician and clown, Khidr Bakr Sarnaji, possess the full lore of the community.

The distinctive song for the rain-dance starts off with a word which none of our men can translate. They say that *kōz* is an adult man who cannot grow a beard, and that seems to be a requirement for the dance; *barate* should mean woman, but they say it is an old word, and that it cannot possibly be translated. The following is the version of Khidr Bakr Sarnaji:

- (1) *Kōzbārāté, kōzbarate,*  
 Rain comes, rain comes,  
 And the grain will come breast-high.  
 The sickle is ready  
 Let there be many to cut (the grain).  
 Be careful, there is but little, it costs a fiftier!  
 Put it on the pack-saddle,  
 Bring it to the threshing-field,  
 Prepare the threshing-heap  
 And do not leave ears standing,  
 Winnow it again and again in the west wind.  
 The valuer will come and estimate

The part of the government, the part of the *tapu* department;  
 (Yet there are left) 560 large quantities in the store heaps,  
 Store them and plaster them well over that the chickens cannot eat them.<sup>1</sup>

Qasim Muhammad himself gave the following version, changing the order of the episodes several times at the various repetitions, and rendered at last:

- (2) *Kozbarate*, in front of the house;  
 Wheat is in the store,  
 Barley is in the store,  
*Burghul* is in the bags,  
 Oil is in the glazed pots;  
 Your grain and your water we will give you.  
 A miracle from God, if it pleases God,  
 Rain he will give.  
 O God, O God,  
 O Prophet,  
 O Jesus,  
 O Moses,  
 O Gabriel,  
 Pray to God that he may give me  
 Swallows, storks, pelicans, chickens, she-goats, good fortune.  
 Blessing (or : miracle) came into the world,  
 Harvest has come,  
 We thresh,  
 We tie the corn on the pack-saddle.  
 Evil insects were in the corn (before the rain).  
 We make chaff,  
 We winnow with the winnowing-fork which we bought in the town.  
 For how much did you buy it?  
 For two rupees we bought it.  
 We brought the waterpots,  
 We brought the sickles,  
 We brought the rakes,  
 We brought the donkey-saddle.  
 Our labourer,  
 The blind snake, the very long one, the thick one has bitten him and he died.

This song seems a particularly clear example of the way in which the texts are handed down. There are certain motives (such as the stages of the harvest) which should definitely occur in the song, and they occur in good order; but while Khidr, the musician, was very conscious of the fact that he had to give us only relevant matter, and therefore rounded off his songs, stupid Qasim

<sup>1</sup> The understanding of these songs is, of course, impossible without some knowledge of the local agricultural uses. The corn is thrown on a heap in an open space, such as the village square, and animals are then driven in a circle along the outer edge of the heap, dragging a simple kind of wooden threshing sledge, while men standing in the middle on the top of the heap keep up the supply of fresh

bundles to the outer ring where the animals pass. The winnowing is next done, first by throwing the stalks up with forks, then by throwing the remaining mixture of chaff, dust, and corn in a sieve which serves for winnowing fan. After that the corn is piled up in a dry clean place and plastered over with mud which soon becomes hard and thus keeps out mice and vermin.

let himself drift pleasantly on the rhythm of the dance-song, and brought in what he remembered of improvised versions of the innumerable performances in which he had taken part. His texts were therefore never identical.

If lines 2-5, with which Qasim started, are really sung at the beginning as a rule, they can only serve as good omen, or as sympathetic magic. (See also the song 'Come rain', No. 4, ll. 6, 7.) In line 6 of the song 'we' seems to mean the dancers, and 'giving rain' would therefore mean *causing* rain, that is by the ritual dance, though it is carefully added that its coming is a gift from God. Next follows an invocation of the Moslem saints, and then not a request for rain or a good harvest, but a series of animals which are the sign that good rains have fallen and that spring is come (see the next song). Then he suddenly interpolates a remark upon the bad insects who devour the corn before the rain comes, this according to his own comment. After mentioning the buying of the winnowing-fork there is an interpolation of the typical oriental question: For how much?

The commentary upon the song-ending was as follows: 'when the labourer goes to gather the cut corn there is a snake beneath it who bites him and he dies.' One wonders whether this incident is a regular accompaniment, or merely an *ad hoc* explanation of the death which the male dancer enacts; for since the subject of the dance, namely the connexion between his life and (rain)-water, is never once mentioned in any song, it may well have been forgotten, and a death-scene compatible with the harvest described in the song may thus have been inserted to explain to me the fact that the dancer mimics death. For, puzzled by the discrepancy between mime and songs, I had asked repeatedly whether words about the reviving of the man or his death were known.

The song which may explain the birds mentioned in Qasim's version starts with the words which the men say are old and which they cannot translate:

- (3) *Chámchällä, bägichällä,*  
The grain needs water,  
The birds need grain,

a very roundabout way of indicating that rain is required. This song then continues, in the version which we owe to Khidr Bakr, with the end (four lines) of the next song and then becomes a call on Allah with a number of epithets.

The following song is actually the one which the onlookers sing while the water is thrown by the householder. This is Khidr Bakr Sarnaji's version:

- (4) Come rain, come rain,  
My stomach is ill,  
I am barefoot,  
I come by night,  
(Because) during the day I am naked.

The flour is in the bag,  
 The oil is in the jars;  
 Whosoever does not give,  
 His wife is a whore.

Another song for the occasion is Khidr Bakr's *Hadiar aman*. The opening word was at first again said to be untranslatable, but was then explained as being said of anything coming from afar, making appearance; also as being vociferated by men displaying dancing bears, monkeys, and the like: the song runs therefore:

- (5) Here it comes, here it comes,  
 Rain comes, rain comes,  
 Grain girdle-high comes,  
 We cut it,  
 We put it in heaps,  
 We put it on the pack-saddle,  
 We bring it to the threshing-place,  
 We make the foot of the threshing-heap into a ring,<sup>1</sup>  
 We thresh,  
 We winnow,  
 The grain we put into the store.

Other verses, however, may also be sung, which at first sight are less clearly related to rain-making; but the fact that the following song is in use at weddings as well as at rain-making dances shows that, whether consciously or not, the ceremony of reviving the dying god through water is still connected in the minds of these people with fertility in general:

- (6) (*Magra manishkina dallâle.*)  
 Don't weep, don't sob, love;  
 Don't weep, don't sob, friend;  
 Our house is far, love;  
 The horseman from afar will come and help us;  
 Don't weep, don't sob, the rain will come, friend;  
 The road is far.  
 Let us go and make a ring and dance;  
 In between two men there will be two girls dancing;  
 We shall dance this step and then that step, and then rest;  
 And then we shall drink coffee in the *Muhtar's* house.

This song, though also sung at weddings, I noted as an accompaniment of the rain-dance in 1930, getting the complete text in 1933 from Khidr Bakr Sarnaji.

The Arabs in these regions seem to have taken over the custom, but with them it has all the signs of being derived. There are two informants: Muhammad 'Arab, who now lives in Khorsabad but whose father had his tents near the junction of the Greater Zab and Tigris and who belongs to the

<sup>1</sup> See footnote to song (1).

'Adwan; and Aissa Sulṭan, from Sharqat. Both have the same opening to the song, but after two lines Muhammad 'Arab tails off into a long list of plants and animals for which rain should be given, while Aissa has a semi-jocular rhyming story which indicates that the efficiency of rain-making is not very seriously believed in. The last is almost a nursery-rhyme:

- (7) O rain, O *ul Wāsi*<sup>1</sup>  
 Lengthen the hair on my head (*rāsi*),  
 I shall then weave you an 'abā (cloak),  
 Which reaches from here to Syria.

The other ('*Umm el-ghait*) runs:

- (8) Mother of rain,  
 Give us rain,  
 And make wet the coat of the shepherd;  
 Our shepherd is bald Hamid,  
 For two years he has not sown (viz. for lack of rain),  
 This year (may) the corn be as high as a door,  
 And barley beyond counting.  
 Now give us bakshish in a sieve,  
 And your boy will be grown up in the morning.

The last sentence but one exhorts the public to reward the singers by throwing food in a big sieve, brought as a collecting-plate. The last sentence conveys a blessing, instead of the curse used by the fiercer Kurds in the song No. (4), when they exhort the householders to give them food.

The invocation of the mother of rain in this song is extremely interesting, since the Arabs on the opposite side of the Syrian desert in Moab use the same term in a rain-charm.<sup>2</sup> While the chiefs of the tribes sacrifice to God for rain, the women make a kind of scarecrow of sticks, dressed up like a woman and richly ornamented, which is called '*Umm el-ghait*. This figure is then paraded in procession through the encampment followed by the singing women.

But the divergence from the usage of the Arabs in northern Iraq is marked; there is no dancing, and no throwing of water in Moab. The actual pantomime seems therefore to be transmitted by the non-Arabic population; and if it were not for that ritual we should not suspect the custom to be connected with the oldest set of beliefs which is at all accessible to us in western Asia; for there is not a single song, so my informants tell me, in which the death of the dancer is commented upon, except the one given in song (2), where, as we have seen, it is perhaps not genuine.

On the other hand, the goat's beard and horns may well have connexions with the early Sumerian god of fertility who appears accompanied by ibex or ram on early seals (see *Iraq*, I. 13, 14). And the Yezidis living in the same region preserve in the name of their god (*Melek Taus*, from Tammuz) and

<sup>1</sup> An epithet of God.

<sup>2</sup> JAUSSEN, *Coûtes des Arabes au Pays de Moab (Études Bibliques)*. Paris, 1908, 326-30.



in some of their rituals (the tearing up of a white bull, for instance, and the putting of anemones, Adonis' flowers, above the doors of the shrine at Sheikh 'Adi in spring) many more features of the Tammuz-Adonis-Osiris cult than is generally admitted. If Furlani objects to this identification of *Melek Tauz* with Tammuz, which he admits to be philologically sound, that there is no similarity between Yezidi religion and Babylonian or Assyrian cultus of historical times,<sup>1</sup> we need not consider the equation invalidated for that reason. On the contrary, we find here a confirmation of observations made elsewhere, in Africa, for instance.<sup>2</sup> It seems that survivals amongst modern savages are nowhere deposits left by the ancient civilizations at their high-water mark. The great achievements are obliterated. What we find are remnants of an older stage, traits of that general level of early Near Eastern civilization which formed the substructure of the exceptional and limited developments in Babylonia and Egypt. That the cult of the god of fertility whose best known name is Tammuz, and of the Mother-goddess, with whom he is associated in ancient ritual as well as in our rain-dance, belongs to the oldest layer of belief which we can reach in Western Asia seems fairly certain.<sup>3</sup> The survivals are not less important for that reason; and a thorough anthropological investigation among the tribes of the foot-hills would produce as rich and varied a harvest of information as any one could wish for. The matter is urgent, since even to those secluded valleys comes enlightenment with the ubiquitous Ford car.

<sup>1</sup> GIUSEPPE FURLANI, *Testi Religiosi dei Yezidi*, Bologna, 1930, 22-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Studies presented to F. Ll. Griffith*, 450-3.

<sup>3</sup> On cylinder seals and on an alabaster vase discovered this winter at Warka the god and the symbol of the Mother-goddess can be traced as far back as the Jamdat Nasr period, and it seems even probable to the present writer that the vase and therefore such seals as are published in NÖLDEKE,

*Fünfter Vorl. Bericht (Preuss. Akademie, Abh. 1933, Nr. 5)*, pl. 29 a, b, will prove to belong to the Uruk period. Compare also Mr. Gadd's surmise that the worship of the Mother-goddess can be traced, at al-'Ubaid, to the al-'Ubaid periods: *History and Monuments of Ur*, 65. An intermediate stage of the survival of the name Ta(mm)uz is presented by the Syrians of Harran in the Middle Ages. See BAUDISSION, *Adonis und Ešmun*, 111-14.